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Legislators plan to codify agreement giving power back to Mackinac Bridge Authority

LANSING – State Sen. Jason Allen, R-Traverse City, Representatives Tom Casperson, R-Escanaba, and Kevin Elsenheimer, R-Bellaire, pledged to codify an agreement reestablishing the Mackinac Bridge Authority's responsibility and stewardship of the Mackinac Bridge.

Although the agreement reached between the Mackinac Bridge Authority and the administration fully restores power to the authority, the agreement needs to become statute to prevent possible future takeover attempts.

Under the agreement, the Michigan Department of Transportation director will defer to the judgment of the Mackinac Bridge Authority on all matters related to the traditional powers, duties, and functions of the MBA.

The agreement was signed today by the governor, MDOT Director Gloria Jeff and Mackinac Bridge Authority Chair William H. Gnodtke.

"It is my intention to continue to explore all options, legal and legislative, to make sure the power of the bridge authority stays in the right hands," Allen said. "I will take whatever action necessary to ensure the safety of the Mackinac Bridge. In the words of President Ronald Reagan 'trust, but verify,' and that's exactly what I intend to do."

Members of the Senate Committee on Transportation held a formal hearing this afternoon where they questioned MDOT officials about the administration's attempt to take over the responsibilities of the Mackinac Bridge. All members of the committee took their turn challenging the Department to determine the basis for their actions.

"This agreement reflects what local residents and everybody who cares about the Mackinac Bridge indicated from the start," said Casperson, R-Escanaba. "The authority has been taking care of the bridge successfully for decades. We're just glad the governor reversed the actions of MDOT so the authority may continue to do its job."

The Mackinac Bridge Authority predates the existence of the bridge itself. Originally created under Public Act 21 of 1950 to study the feasibility of constructing a bridge to

cross the Straits of Mackinac, the Mackinac Bridge Authority has successfully managed the operation and maintenance of the bridge, including the capacity to set toll rates.

At a town hall meeting held by hosted by Allen along with Casperson and Elsenheimer earlier this month, Michigan Department of Transportation Director Gloria Jeff's decision to take away the decades-long responsibilities of the Mackinac Bridge Authority based on her interpretation of attorney general opinions from the 1960s was subject to harsh criticism from northern Michigan residents.

"The authority, the bridge and the people of Michigan survived the attempted bridge take over and came out with an agreement similar to what we are pushing for," Elsenheimer said. "I'm encouraged that by following through with our legislation to guarantee those agreement terms by making them law, future governors and state directors can avoid a repeat of this mistake."

Legislation codifying the agreement into statute will be introduced in both chambers later this fall.

"It's nice to know that once again the Mackinac Bridge is in safe hands," Allen said. "However, we need to make sure it remains that way. Though everyone feels this is a positive development, it is not a long term solution. In my opinion, a good agreement will make an even better law."

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